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Listening to African-American Students: An Exploratory Analysis of Factors that Foster Academic Success

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Center for Social Development

George Warren Brown School of Social Work

Listening to African-American Students:
An Exploratory Analysis of Factors that Foster Academic Success

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Abstract

This exploratory study assessed African-American freshman and sophomore students' decisions to remain in school and their opinions regarding specific dropout prevention programs. Results indicated that students believed that school completion would prepare them for the future. The opinion of family members was consistently ranked as most important in supporting students' decisions to remain in school, and the primary barriers to completing school were related to family issues, academic problems and personal issues. Overall, students were most interested in intervention programs having to do with preparation for their futures—jobs and goals. The importance of tailoring education to meet the needs of African-American students is emphasized.

Key words: African-American youth, dropout programs, education, school completion

African-American Youth and School Dropout

The problem of school dropout remains a crisis for American society. This is true particularly for African-American adolescents in urban areas, for whom the attrition rate can often reach 50 percent (Eckenrode et al., 1995; LeCompte & Goebel, 1987). Numerous dropout prevention programs and policies have been implemented with varying success. However, often little is known about students' attitudes and perceptions of such programs. Since students are the 'consumers of education' (Davidson, 1996), it makes sense to employ market research strategies when developing school programs. In order to provide equal opportunity to all populations, and to ensure a viable pool of qualified employees in the future, schools must learn how to make education more relevant and meaningful to all students (Governor's Advisory Council on Literacy, 1989). Tailoring education to meet the needs of African-American adolescents makes even more sense when the principal reason cited for dropping out is a lack of engagement (Mann, 1986; Rumberger, 1987; Davidson, 1996). Reports based on students' actual opinions regarding dropout prevention programs are not common; hence this study provides information typically not seen in the dropout prevention literature. In addition, recommendations for social work and educational interventions are highlighted.

High school dropouts face tremendous obstacles and place themselves at risk for a disadvantageous future (Srebnik & Elias, 1993; Entwisle, Alexander & Olson, 1997). Dropouts experience higher levels of unemployment than do high school graduates (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997) and have significantly lower median annual earnings than do graduates (National Center for Education Statistics, 1998). Dropouts are also more likely to use welfare, go to prison, and have poor health (Srebnik & Elias, 1993). Such problems affect society as well as individual dropouts because, according to one estimate, each dropout represents "an average loss of $58,930 in federal and state income taxes during the course of a lifetime" (Imel, 1993, p.1).

Although dropout rates for African-American youth have declined, African-Americans are still more likely to dropout than are whites (National Center for Education Statistics, 1998). Youth from poor families are also more likely to dropout than those from middle- and high-income families (National Center for Education Statistics, 1998; Belluck, 1999). Moreover, the dropout rate for inner city schools such as the one discussed in this study can reach 40–50 percent (LeCompte & Goebel, 1987; Braddock & McPartland, 1993).

A popular explanation for the academic disengagement of African-American adolescents is termed 'oppositional culture' (Ogbu, 1994; Fordham & Ogbu, 1987). According to this theory, African-American youth have lower motivation and engagement because they do not perceive equal opportunity and because they react against the dominant culture. This theory has explanatory value, but it can also be seen as misleading and even dangerous. It is somewhat misleading, because it oversimplifies the factors leading to dropout and fails to take into account the large number of students who succeed (Davidson, 1996). It is dangerous because its popularity may add to the negative expectations of African-American youth, resulting in self-fulfilling prophecy (e.g., Gottfredson, Fink & Graham, 1994; Kolb & Jussim, 1994). It may be more constructive to focus on the factors that keep African-American students engaged. This is

not an unrealistic objective, given the success of African-American students in programs such as the Media Academy (Wehlage, 1987) and in Catholic schools (Keith & Page, 1985; Coleman & Hoeffer, 1987; Coleman, 1987), relative to their public school peers.

Historically, less attention has been paid to the normal non-problematic life choices of African-American youth or the cognitive, social and environmental factors that may contribute to their positive life choices, such as completing high school. Certainly many studies have focused on the problem of dropout, particularly among African-American youth. However, recent research has begun to focus on the development of assets and strengths among African-American youth (Epstein 1995; Sanders, 1998). Factors such as parental support and caring school communities have been found to be positive predictors of academic self concept, behavior at school and attitudes towards school (Epstein, 1987, 1995; Sanders, 1998, 1996; Rouk, 1999; Bowen & Bowen, 1998a&b). Other research has also begun to focus on the various external factors that influence school success (Bowen & Bowen, 1999; Nash & Bowen, 1999; Sanders, 1998). Overall, these studies represent a theoretical shift away from deficit-oriented perspectives to a broadened understanding of what successful African-American youth look like.

This study focuses on why African-American youth complete school rather than limiting its focus only on why some drop out. Such a question requires a focus on adolescent decision making from a non-deviant perspective. Because of its focus, the information provided by this study may be used to inform research that attempts to understand the perceptions of African-Americans in schools and may also inform the design of interventions aimed at this population. This study focuses on the perceptions of students and views the intention to stay in school as a positive life choice of critical importance to African-American youth. In addition, the results from the present study allow for an understanding of persistence and dropout behavior from the standpoint of the student. This is important because, "from a social work perspective, a student's perspective may represent the most important aspect of reality" (Richman et al., 1998, p.313). This standpoint will illustrate the impact of perceived barriers, attitudes, and influences on students' decisions to remain in or drop out of school. Such a perspective lends itself well to developing appropriate interventions that target specific issues as identified by the students themselves.

Study.

The overall goal of this study was to explore factors that contribute to school persistence in a cohort of African-American students. This paper also describes the findings of a survey of African-American high school students regarding programs that they think would be useful and would increase school persistence.

Method.

The students interviewed attended a high school located in large metropolitan area. The school has a total enrollment of approximately 1,200, and the student body is primarily (99%) African-American. The initial sample included 231 ninth-grade African-American students (103 males and 128 females). The youth interviewed consisted of 80 percent of the initial freshman class. About half of the students in the sample received either free or subsidized lunches. Thirty-one

percent of the students resided with both of their biological parents and the rest with single parents or in alternative living situations.

Youth were recruited with the assistance of a school guidance counselor who served as primary liaison between students and the research team members. Students were told that the research team would seek to interview them for four consecutive years to collect data on their attitudes toward school and school completion. They were asked to volunteer through their homeroom classes. Students who volunteered to participate in the study were asked to sign consent forms agreeing to future contacts. Consent was also obtained from each student's parent or legal guardian. Students were surveyed in groups of 15 to 40. Because of the wide variability in reading levels, a research assistant read the items to the group while students followed along with their questionnaires. An additional research assistant was also present to assist students who had trouble completing the materials. The research assistants who presented the survey to students were also African-American. Each questionnaire administration took approximately one hour, and students were paid $15 for their time.

Students were surveyed in the first term of their freshman year (Time 1). The same questionnaire was administered to these students at the beginning of their sophomore year (Time 2). The data reported in this paper uses findings only from students who completed a questionnaire at both Time 1 and Time 2 (N=191). Restricting the sample to students who completed a questionnaire for both years allows for the inspection of cohort effects.

Measures.

The items used in the questionnaire were developed from focus groups of students as well as the current literature on dropout behavior. The following five subsections describe the variables used in this analysis.

1. Attitudes regarding school completion: Students were asked to rate the value (positive vs. negative) and perceived likelihood of 11 consequences of school completion. These evaluation and expectancy ratings were then multiplied. Items were coded on a Likert scale from -3 to 3 and, after multiplication, attitude variables have a possible range from -9 to 9. A high score indicates that a student both believed the outcome to be important and expected a particular consequence of school completion to occur, while a low score indicates that a student both believed the outcome to be important and expected a particular consequence of school completion would not occur. Examples of a belief and expectation question are provided below:

For me, preparation for college is:

	Very	Somewhat	Slightly	Neither	Slightly	Somewhat	Very	
BAD	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	GOOD

Completing the school year will prepare me for college:

	Very	Somewhat	Slightly	Neither	Slightly	Somewhat	Very	
UNLIKELY	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	LIKELY

2. Social norms: Measures of social norms are based on items that assess beliefs about how specific significant others (e.g., parents, classmates, friends) feel about the students' school completion and items that assess the students' motivation to comply with each of those specified others. The importance of beliefs and motivation to comply ratings were then multiplied. The items were coded on a scale from -3 to 3, and the constructed social norm variables range from -9 to 9. A high score indicates that a significant other believed the student's school completion was important and that the respondent was motivated to comply with that person's belief. A low score indicates that a significant other did not value the student's school completion and that the respondent was not motivated to comply with that person's belief. Examples of a normative belief and compliance question are provided below:

My mother thinks that I should complete the school year:

	Very	Somewhat	Slightly	Neither	Slightly	Somewhat	Very	
UNLIKELY	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	LIKELY

Generally speaking, I want to do what my mother thinks I should do:

	Very	Somewhat	Slightly	Neither	Slightly	Somewhat	Very	
UNLIKELY	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	LIKELY

3. Barriers: Students were asked to rate 16 different obstacles that could affect school completion. Students also rated the ease with which these obstacles could be overcome. The items reflecting the importance of each barrier were multiplied with the corresponding items reflecting the difficulty or ease with which the student felt the barrier could be overcome. The items were coded on a scale from 1 to 7 and the constructed variables range from 1 to 49. A high score reflects a barrier that is important and difficult to overcome. A low score reflects a barrier that is unimportant and easy to overcome. Examples are provided below:

Family obligations keep me from attending school. For me this problem is:

	Very	Somewhat	Slightly	Neither	Slightly	Somewhat	Very	
UNIMPORTANT	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	IMPORTANT

For me to overcome this problem would be:

	Very	Somewhat	Slightly	Neither	Slightly	Somewhat	Very	
EASY	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	HARD

4. School variables: Students were asked questions about both positive and negative school events. Students were asked whether or not they perceived a positive school environment (e.g., teachers who care and work hard) and negative school environment (e.g., drug dealing, school equipment damaged).

5. Student perceptions regarding interventions: The questions regarding specific intervention components were administered during the sophomore year only. Students were asked about their opinions on school programs in six general areas. These general areas have been identified in the dropout/intervention literature as linked to students' academic persistence and attitudes toward school. Students were first asked if they thought that students at their school would benefit from

each type of program, with responses on a 7-point scale ranging from "very much disagree" to "very much agree." Next, students were asked to check the activities that should be included in each type of school program and to write in any additional activities that they thought should be a part of each program. Students were then asked how much they thought each type of program would help students to stay in school, on a 7-point scale ranging from "very much disagree" to "very much agree." Students were also asked whether each type of program should be offered after school or during school. Finally, for the mentor/role model program, students were asked to indicate whom they would prefer to have as a mentor or role model, a peer, a college student, or an adult in the community.

Attrition Analysis.

T-tests were conducted to determine if the subjects excluded from the analysis (n=40) differed from the cohort studied (n=191) on the following variables: intention to complete school, school credits earned, grade point average (GPA), attendance, standardized test scores (math, reading, science, social studies), number of honors courses taken, suspensions, and school variables. The group of excluded subjects had significantly less intention to complete school ($t=3.52$, $p=.001$), fewer completed high school credits ($t=6.14$, $p=.000$), lower GPAs ($t=5.42$, $p=.000$), and lower attendance records ($t=-5.09$, $p=.000$) than the group that completed questionnaires at both Time 1 and Time 2. They were also enrolled in fewer honors courses ($t=3.48$, $p=.001$) and were more likely to have been suspended ($t=-2.71$, $p=.010$). The groups did not differ on standardized test scores or in their perceptions of school violence, school decline, or positive school events.

These findings are not surprising given that the subjects who did not complete a questionnaire during their sophomore year included many students who had dropped out of school, transferred or moved, were in jail, or were experiencing other problems. It is interesting to note that the groups differed on measures related to academic efficacy and performance (i.e., GPA, honors courses, attendance, suspensions, credits earned) and not on measures of opportunities to demonstrate academic knowledge (i.e., standardized test scores). This is an important finding because fostering the academic efficacy of African-American youth may be an essential component of designing interventions. Further, there were no differences in the groups' perception of school events.

Results.

Attitudes Regarding School Completion.

In both years, the highest-ranked outcomes of and expectations regarding school completion were that school completion would: enable them to do something positive with their lives, give them a sense of accomplishment, allow them to learn new things, give them opportunities to work hard, create new challenges, and prepare them for college. In addition, several students noted that school completion would 'be a waste of time' (Table 1). It is interesting to note that, in both years, students placed the most value on outcomes that were related to their futures. Job training and acquiring material goods were not ranked as important, and leisure activities such as joining clubs and seeing friends were the least important to students. Although students seem to believe

that school completion is important to their futures, they do not expect that school completion will help them get jobs or acquire material goods.

TABLE 1
Mean Attitudes Regarding the Consequences of School Completion

	Time 1	Time 2
Would allow me to do something positive with my life	7.41	7.45
Would allow me a sense of accomplishment	6.96	7.00
Would allow me a chance to learn new things	6.84	6.65
Would give me the opportunity to work hard	6.31	6.11
Would provide me with new challenges	5.77	5.65
Would be a waste of my time	5.71	4.85
Would prepare me for college	5.60	4.68
Would give me a chance to join clubs/sports	4.73	4.56
Would provide me with job training	4.09	4.19
Would help me acquire material goods	3.70	3.61
Would help me stay out of trouble	3.65	3.95
Would give me opportunities to see friends	2.60	2.64
Would increase the chance that I would be told what to do	1.59	0.93
Would give me no time for fun/leisure	-0.20	0.13

To note: Variables range from -9 to 9. A high score indicates that a student both believed the outcome to be important and expected a particular consequence of school completion to occur. A low score indicates that a student both believed the outcome to be important and expected a particular consequence of school completion would not occur.

At the same time, some students expected that school completion would be a waste of time, and this ranked before college preparation. This finding may reflect the social reality of the students surveyed: Some students may perceive graduating from high school to be a 'waste of time' given the current poor job opportunities available to African-American high school graduates. To further examine this issue, students who noted that school completion was a 'waste of time' (n=29) were compared with the remaining students (n=162). Students who indicated that school completion was a waste of time had lower intentions to complete school ($t=2.45$, $p=.020$) and had lower GPAs ($t=3.43$, $p=.001$) than other students.

Social norms.

What do students think about the value that significant others place on school completion? In both years, students consistently ranked the opinion of family members as most important (Table 2). Mother and father were ranked first and second in both years. Close relatives were ranked third during freshman year and fourth during sophomore year. Although the mean change from freshman to sophomore years was not significant, teachers did drop in rank between freshman and sophomore years, while school counselors rose in rank. This may indicate that students developed relationships with their school counselors over time.

TABLE 2
Mean Ratings of Social Normative Beliefs

	Time 1	Time 2
Mother	5.83	6.20
Father	5.40	5.16
Close relative	4.91	4.64
Teacher	4.69	4.11
School counselor	4.50	4.95
Boy/Girl Friend	3.70	3.54
Close friend	3.55	3.66
Classmates	1.97	1.42

To note: Variables range from -9 to 9. A high score indicates that the significant other's belief about school completion was important and that the respondent was motivated to comply with that person's belief. A low score indicates that the significant other's opinion was unimportant and that the respondent was not motivated to comply with that person's belief.

Overall, results indicate that family members have the most influence on students' beliefs about school completion as opposed to school counselors and teachers. In addition, peers such as classmates, boy/girl friends, and friends have the least influence on student's decisions to remain in school. Students place the most importance on the opinions of significant adults and indicate that they are most likely to comply with those adults.

Barriers.

Analyses of the particular barriers and their significance in the lives of students provide specific information regarding the difficulties students face. Mean ratings of the barriers can be seen in Table 3. Although there was some variance in the rank order between Time 1 and Time 2, it appears that, in both years, family issues (family obligations and not receiving family support), personal issues (sickness, personal problems, not having self confidence), and academic problems (not having homework done, not understanding what was taught) were the most important barriers to school completion.

TABLE 3
Mean Ratings of Barriers

No support from family	17.59	13.82
Sickness	16.76	14.10
Personal problems	16.43	12.95
Not understanding what is taught	16.35	15.14
No having homework done	14.96	12.74
No self confidence	14.10	12.18
No support from teachers	14.06	13.71
Fights with other students	12.87	10.16
No transportation	12.77	9.84
Too tired to go to school	12.07	10.12
No study skills	11.84	10.84
Time conflicts with job	11.74	8.92
Arguments with teachers	11.44	9.87
Picked on at school	8.93	6.97
Forgetting to go to school	8.84	6.98

To note: Variables range from 1 to 49. A high score reflects a barrier that is important and difficult to overcome. A low score reflects a barrier that is unimportant and easy to overcome.

Table 4 shows the percentage of students who indicated that particular barriers were 'very important' problems that prevented them from attending school. The same barriers were important in both years and related to academic skills (homework not done, not understanding what was taught, and no study skills), family issues (family obligations and not receiving support from family) and personal issues (sickness, not having self confidence). It is important to note that, at Time 2, fewer students rated fifteen out of the sixteen barriers as “very important.” The exception was “no support from teachers,” which was slightly more likely to be perceived as a “very important” barrier at Time 2.

TABLE 4
Percentage of Students who Note Barrier as 'Very Important'

BARRIER	Time 1	Time 2
No self confidence	54	41
Homework not done	53	43
No support from family	49	42
Family obligations	45	27
Not understanding what is taught	45	39
No study skills	41	34
Sickness	36	23
No transportation	34	25
Fights with students	33	21
Forgetting to go to school	31	16
Personal problems	3	22
No support from teachers	28	3
Fights with teachers	26	22
Too tired to go to school	26	22
Time conflicts with job	24	12
Picked on at school	17	9

School Variables.

Students were asked to report on positive and negative events at their schools (Table 5). In both years, the majority of students noted drug dealing and damaged school equipment. Almost all students reported the presence of after-school activities. However, interesting findings emerged when Wilcoxon Signed-Rank tests were used to test for differences in student responses between Time 1 and Time 2. Sophomore students reported significantly more shootings and knifings at school and reported that students hurt more teachers. Further, significantly fewer sophomores felt proud of their school, felt that teachers cared and worked hard, felt that counselors helped with problems, and noted friendly relationships between students.

Table 5
Differences in Students' Perceptions of School Factors

Percent of 'yes' respondents

Negative School Indicators	**TIME 1**	**TIME 2**
Drug dealing	70%	74%
Shootings/Knifings**	21%	33%
Teachers hurt by students**	22%	35%
School equipment damaged	87%	86%
Positive School Indicators	**TIME 1**	**TIME 2**
After school activities	99%	97%
Friendly relations bw/ students***	96%	79%
Teachers care and work hard***	93%	62%
Counselors help with problems***	92%	76%
Feeling proud of school***	82%	48%

***p≤.05, **p≤.01, ***p≤.001**

Student Perceptions Regarding Interventions.

During the sophomore year, students rated the following programs: (1) a school program that provides help on homework, (2) a school program that involves the students' families more, (3) a school program to improve teacher-student relations, (4) a school program to help students with personal concerns, (5) a school program that helps students find jobs, and (6) a mentoring or role model program. The sophomores were asked if they thought students would benefit from having each program, on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "very much disagree" to "very much agree". Average ratings for all six programs were greater than 5, indicating that respondents at least slightly agreed that students would benefit from each program (Table 6). Students gave the highest rating to the program to help them to find jobs. Students were also asked if they thought each program would help students to stay in school. The highest rating was given to a mentor/role model program.

Table 6
Rank of Proposed School Programs by Students

	Rank
Programs Expected to Benefit Students	
Help getting a job	1
Help with personal concerns	2
Help on homework	3
Mentor/role model program	4
Improve student/teacher relations	5
Involve families more	6
Programs Expected to Keep Students in School	
Mentor/role model program	1
Help on homework	2
Help with personal concerns	3
Help getting a job	4
Improve student/teacher relations	5
Involve families more	6

Finally, students were given a list of particular activities that each program might include and were asked to check activities that they thought should be a part of each program. Results indicate that if a program were instituted to provide them with a mentor then 57 percent would desire help planning future goals, 57 percent want college students as mentors, 55 percent would want to have someone to talk about future goals with and 51 percent would want help with their homework. In addition, results indicate that if a program were instituted to help them get a job, then 87 percent of the students would want job training, 69 percent would want to learn job skills, and 56 percent would want to visit job sites (Table 7). If a program were designed to help students with their personal concerns, then 74 percent would want to increase their academic self-confidence.

Table 7
Percent of Students in Favor of Specific Program Components

Type of Program	Program Component	% in Favor
Help on homework	teachers as tutors	66.5
	increasing students' confidence in study skills	55.5
	group tutoring sessions	53.5
Involve families more	inviting families to school events	77.4
	regular parent/teacher meetings	72.9
	parent center located in school	65.2
Improve student-teacher relations	one-on-one meetings btw teachers & students	71.0
	group discussions re: frustrations	61.3
	training teachers to control their frustrations	60.0
Help students w\ personal concerns	increasing students' academic self-confidence	73.5
	peer groups to discuss personal concerns	49.0
Help students get a job	job training	86.5
	learning about job skills	69.0
	visiting job sites	55.5
Mentor/Role Model	getting help planning future goals	57.4
	college students as tutors	56.8
	having someone to talk to about future goals	54.8
	help with homework	51.0
	adults in community as role models	29.0
	peers as role models	11.6

Implications for School Social Work

Part of encouraging positive attitudes regarding school completion may happen by connecting students to the future, and, as this study demonstrates, African-American students are concerned about future events. However, students often fail to see the relevance of their school experiences to future goals (Srebnick & Elias, 1993). This is confirmed by our finding that, although student attitudes are future-oriented in the abstract sense, they are less likely to see the connection between school and employment opportunities. As noted previously, African-American youth may question the value of high school completion. Assisting students in making the connection between school and employment should reduce dropout and increase students' desire to remain in school, particularly for students who believe school completion is a “waste of time.”

Not surprisingly, our study found that students are most interested in programs having to do with preparation for their futures—jobs and goals. The most popular program would involve job training during school combined with having a college student or adult mentor with whom students could discuss future goals. Because students indicate that school completion will enable

them to do positive things with their lives, providing a place to discuss future goals may be an important intervention.

Vocational programs that include hands-on training, a connection to work, life skills training and a performance approach have been successful in the past at increasing the likelihood of staying in school and increasing graduation rates (Rumberger, 1987; Imel, 1993). In all, programs that promote student involvement in their education are ideal, particularly programs that reach students before they are at risk.

This study indicates that students value the opinions of the adults in their lives and are likely to comply with these adults—particularly family members. Parents and adult caretakers are often an important source of support relating to school success (Richman et al.,1998; Bowen & Bowen, 1998a, 1999b). Home academic culture has the potential to increase school performance, especially when parents encourage homework completion and demonstrate positive regard for educational attainment (Rouk, 1999; Bowen & Bowen, 1998a, 1999b). Social workers can play a vital role in encouraging a positive academic culture in families as well as encourage parents to become involved in school-based activities (Bowen & Bowen, 1998a, 1999b; Epstein, 1995). In fact, Bowen & Bowen (1998b) note four specific ways in which school social workers might increase parental involvement in the educational experiences of their children: (1) promote and increase parental engagement within the school, (2) provide parent education seminars (especially those that emphasize the importance of encouraging educational attainment to their children), (3) educate parents about the importance of their involvement in their children's school-based activities and (4) encourage students to speak to their parents about their school activities and performance. Positive support from immediate family members is critical for most students; therefore, including family members in interventions is crucial.

Students need adults who will go out of their way to make themselves available to students, who will avoid an authoritarian relationships, and who convey to students that they understand where they are 'coming from' (Humm, 1984). Therefore, a mentoring program that uses adult mentors is likely to be more successful than a program that uses peers. This conclusion is also supported by the finding that only 12 percent of the students in this study desire a peer as a role model. Certainly the provision of one-on-one assistance must be provided to students, to ensure that they are "on the right track" and to provide space where their concerns and fears can be addressed. Tutoring or mentoring programs also have the potential to promote positive beliefs regarding school (Srebnik & Elias, 1993).

In terms of school factors, the most important findings are related to the decline in positive school events reported from students from freshman to sophomore year. In their sophomore year, fewer students felt proud of their school, and fewer felt that their teachers cared about them, that counselors helped them with problems, and that friendly relationships among students existed. This decline in positive school events is particularly problematic because positive connections at school are "…needed to enhance students' sense of engagement and to prevent the bonding process from eroding" (Srebnik & Elias, p.529). Overall, results indicate that relationships between students and teachers deteriorate over time. Frustrations between teachers and students as well as the fact that students do not perceive support from teachers is especially problematic,

as bonding between students and teachers may be a critical or protective factor in helping students remain connected and enrolled in school (Hawkins & Weiss, 1985; Sanders, 1998). In this study, although students did not rank improving student-teacher relationships as the type of program they were most interested in, 71 percent of students did indicate that they would be interested in one-on-one meetings with teachers, 61 percent were in favor of group discussions with teachers to discuss their frustrations, and 60 percent indicated that teachers should be taught to control their frustrations with students.

Individual schools should assess specific barriers for students and develop programs that alleviate those barriers. Our results indicate that while some consistencies emerge around barrier themes, the ranking of particular barriers to school completion changed from freshman to sophomore year. Therefore, it is plausible that barriers will vary from school to school and by school year. For example, the barriers that high school freshman contend with may differ from those barriers during other years of high school. Therefore, it is important that schools conduct individual assessments each year. Such assessments will enable schools to target the specific concerns of their students. School social workers can play an important role in conducting assessments of the school environment, the community around the school and the specific needs and concerns of the students.

Thus, improving the school environment by fostering a positive school environment may be an important part of dropout prevention for African-American students. In fact, "a good deal of evidence now suggests that a strong sense of community in schools has benefits for both staff members and students and provides a necessary foundation for school improvement" (Royal & Rossi, 1997, p.1). The family, school and community together influence the academic achievement of youth (Epstein, 1995; Coleman, 1987) and a positive school community includes respect, caring, inclusiveness, trust, empowerment, and commitment (Raywid, 1993). In schools where such qualities exist, there are fewer discipline problems, higher academic performance, lower dropout rates and improved relationships between teachers and staff (Royal & Rossi, 1997).

School social workers trained to seek and discover the connections between the individual, family, school and community contexts will be able to design and implement programs that fit the specific needs of the students in their schools. Further, school social workers that create linkages between students, teachers, parents and the community as well as mediate conflicts between these systems will serve students well. For example, school social workers who are able to encourage a supportive home academic environment among parents or who are able to provide teachers with diversity training will be particularly successful (Allen-Meares, 1994). The results of this study (as well as previous research) have documented the importance of multi-systemic intervention to prevent high school dropout among African-American students. Social workers are trained to understand problems utilizing an ecological perspective and thus are in an excellent position to intervene on behalf of African-American students.

Conclusion

It is important to note that these findings are based on a cross-sectional examination of data from a larger longitudinal study. Further, the data were collected from students in a single urban high school. Therefore the findings are preliminary, based on exploratory, descriptive analysis. The sample used in this study is a convenience sample, and generalizations to other populations must be made with caution. However, it is hoped that this preliminary analysis will guide further research that will inform those who design prevention programs aimed at urban African-American youth.

Further research should examine gender differences in attitudes, social norms, and barriers. Findings also warrant further analysis of teacher-student relationships. The inclusion of variables related to teachers—such as racial/ethnic composition of teachers, turn-over, and tenure—may be helpful. Extending this study to include data from junior and senior years will allow for further analysis of current findings over time. In particular, does the school environment continue to decline, or have we captured a 'sophomore slump' effect?

It is important that school social workers learn to carefully examine the literature on dropout programs and prevention. For social work students, the vast body of educational research may appear daunting; thus, it is important to assist social work students in their pursuit of information. It is critical that school social workers be taught to carefully evaluate the numerous programs used in schools and to tailor programs to meet the specific needs of the students.

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